A Solution to the Pseudo-Problem of Other Minds

Philosophy of mind is famously full of strange creatures: philosophical zombies, colour-deprived super-scientists, brains inexplicably in vats, teleportation gone wrong. These thought experiments dominate textbooks and classrooms, and are often presented as rigorous tools for revealing the hidden nature of consciousness.

But they share an awkward problem: the more imaginative they become, the less they resemble the reality we all experience, and the more divorced they are from the actual empirical evidence we have available on the nature of mind.

A simple classroom activity helps illuminate this problem.

Play Your Cards Right and Discover That Other People Have Minds!

Play Your Cards Right and Discover That Other People Have Minds! In my lesson, each student receives two cards from my philosophy-themed deck. Every card features a philosopher's name as well as a number. In round one, I only tell them the name of the philosopher on my card. Their task is to guess whether their card, which they have not looked at, is higher or lower than my own. Their guesses feel philosophical, in a way, Plato is "higher" than Hume, perhaps, or Kant "higher" than Mill. But none of this helps them win the game. And that is exactly the point. They are reasoning with the wrong kind of information.

In the second round, I tell them the number of my card. Now their guesses become rational. Evidence appears, the possibilities shrink, and their judgements become grounded. The aim of this exercise is to support Russells' "Best Hypothesis" conclusion about the pseudo-question of whether other people have minds. It reveals something deeper though, something that analytic investigation into the nature of the mind could learn from: when you remove the essential evidence you are left with guesswork and faulty reasoning. In the case of other minds, the card I have, so to speak, is a three, maybe even a two, and yet the sceptic acts as if it were a seven. We can never know, they say, best not to even speculate about it. In the first assertion, of course they are totally right, but in the second, well, we can do much more than speculate. The problem of other minds sometimes feels like it is presented as a 50 50 guess, like the toss of a coin. That would be a poor strategy in higher or lower, and a poorer way to do philosophy.

Our confidence that others have minds is grounded in overwhelming empirical evidence. Other human beings share the same brain structures, the same patterns of behaviour, the same evolutionary history and the same functional organisation as we do. Strip away these facts in an analysis of the mind and you are not analysing the mind at all. David Chalmers has acknowledged that p-zombies are not conceivable in this world, since we know the mind to be evidently dependent on the brain. He needs to go to remote possible worlds to postulate they might exist there. I disagree. A being with the same evolution, the same physical structure, and the same self-report of experience is almost certainly the same kind of being. One who is identical in all respects but the most significant one is neither conceivable nor possible.

The End of the Pseudo- Problem

Arguments like philosophical zombies or Mary's colour omniscience work by removing the kinds of evidence we normally rely on. They isolate the concept under analysis from the empirical evidence that surrounds it and then purport to make ontological claims from this sanitised conceptual analysis. A scenario that removes all the constraints that make a thing what it is cannot reveal its nature. If I imagine water that isn't drinkable, liquid and transparent then I am not just making things up. Likewise, a mind that does not arise from a brain and is not involved in the activity of life is a fiction precisely because it undermines everything that we know about brains and minds.

If such thought experiments are intended as illustrative analogies then that is fine by me. They work in showing how mind and matter might be conceived as separate phenomena. But if their aim is philosophical insight then they fail, because they are built on an approach to thought experiments that does not work. They are not grounded in experience, and they intentionally separate themselves from scientific understanding.

Evidence matters, evidently. The Higher Lower game shows something philosophy sometimes forgets. Reasoning gets better when we use evidence, and worse when we remove it. When students use the number on the card, their inference becomes reliable. When they use the philosopher's name, it becomes guesswork.

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And this is where the Qualia Comparability Thesis, developed by a student in my classroom, becomes especially powerful. Instead of removing evidence, it imagines adding more. Rather than fantasy scenarios, it considers what would happen if we could compare experiences directly in a controlled environment. It does not reject science, it extends it. It shows that the existence of other minds is not merely the best hypothesis but the only hypothesis that aligns with the data from neuroscience and evolutionary biology, and with the lived experience of being with others as conscious beings.

The Higher–Lower game reveals a simple lesson for philosophy: The quality of your reasoning depends on the quality of your information. This does not mean we should abandon thought experiments - they have an illustrative role even if they do not fulfil an ontological purpose. But we should be careful about believing that imaginary cases reveal truths about real consciousness. When we rely on the right evidence, our conclusions become grounded and sensible. When we rely on irrelevant details — or remove evidence entirely — our intuitions drift into illusion. Just like in the card game, sometimes the philosopher on the card looks important. But it's the number we need.